

Essay Exams

In my upper level courses, I typically give essay exams. Sometimes, students find it hard to adjust to this form of examination. So, I have put this information together...

You will review the lecture slides but also read the textbook sections that pertain to the slides (I skip certain sections of the textbooks because we cannot cover everything). Remember, in essay exams, make sure that you do not spend too much time on one question and then end up with unanswered questions at the end of the time period. Keep track of time (wear a watch). Remember to use diagrams to illustrate an answer. Write clearly (start answer by restating the question..."the reason the solution turns dark is because..."). Write clearly (a very important skill).

From Quickstudy guides by Barcharts, Inc. (www.quickstudy.com):

Essay Exams

- **Planning your time when answering essay questions is more important than in objective type tests!**
- **Read through the entire examination first**
 - Get a feel for the questions you are expected to answer
 - If the exam allows you to choose from a number of questions, be sure to number your answers exactly to match the questions
- **Follow directions carefully:**
 - Pay attention to the key words in the question: Words such as "list," "describe," "compare and contrast," and "outline" require different types of answers
 - **Don't "write around" the question, but answer it directly and concisely**
- **Outlining**
 - After scanning the list of questions, choose those about which you know most
 - On scrap paper, quickly prepare an outline of important ideas and facts to be included in your response
 - Your opening statement summarizes what you are going to write; the following sentence should support your opening statement
 - Your conclusion should show how your body text supported your opening statement
- **It is absolutely essential that your ideas can be read and understood:** Print neatly and use correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling

The following is taken from:

http://www.foothill.fhda.edu/fac/klenkeit/generaldoc/answering_essay_exams.htm

Much of the advice that follows may seem elementary to those who already have extensive experience with in-class essay exams. Reviewing the basics is, however, a good idea. You might compare my list with your own experiences.

Taking exams

1. Prepare for the exam by going over the study guide. Look over the [Guide to writing social science essays & exams](#) for tips on organizing and outlining your essays.
2. Get a normal night's sleep before an exam. Pulling an all nighter often results in muddled responses in essays.
3. Read the entire exam paper through before you begin to write. Note all of the instructions given about the number and choice of questions. **Underline** or **circle** directions such as "choose" or "cite a specific example from XXX article."
4. The next step is to make a rough time budget. Note the point value (or percentage value) of each question. Then decide how long to spend on each question and stick to your time plan.
5. Select those questions that you feel quite sure that you can answer. This seems obvious advice, but students sometimes tackle questions because they seem more difficult. They think that the instructor will be impressed by their efforts to deal with the harder question. This is nearly always a mistake. Pick the question that you are most confident about answering.
6. Make sure that you interpret the question correctly. A question that asks you to compare and contrast means that you are to do both. Too often with such questions, students only offer contrasts and do not give any comparisons.
7. Some of the terms that are used frequently in essay questions are listed below. Make sure that you are clear about the meaning of these terms.

Make a brief outline of the main points you want to make and jot terms you will incorporate and examples you might use. Once you have a brief outline, begin writing and check off each point in your outline as you complete it. Since you have done your thinking/organizing at the beginning (your outline) you do not have to constantly stop and decide where you are in your answer. This saves time.

8. Avoid lengthy introductory paragraphs on most in-class essay exams. Jump right in to answer the question. Make a thesis statement that addresses the question and then back it up with a specific example or examples.
9. Never do less than the required number of answers. If you see that you are running short on time leave that answer unfinished or as briefly as possible summarize the last part of the answer. Go on to the next question. Write something -- even a brief summary will usually earn some points, while a blank answer will earn zero.
10. Write legibly. If the reader cannot decipher your handwriting your grade may be penalized.

11. Leave time, if you can, to re-read your paper before you hand it in. Mistakes can be made when writing quickly and a re-read will allow you to make corrections. A negative may be omitted, for example, making nonsense of a sentence. You may have written the word "to" when you meant to use "too". You may have written there when you meant their. You may have failed to explain or define a term that you used.

Forming a thesis statement

The thesis statement is possibly the most important element of your written work. In one simple statement it tells the reader what you will be writing about. In other words, the thesis should be a summary of what the essay is going to talk about. The thesis statement should be straightforward and declarative. The rest of the essay should support or expand upon the thesis.

An example of a thesis statement for web assignment 2 might be: "The dual labor market theory best describes the impetus for migration between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia." This tells the reader that the author is going to first summarize the dual labor market theory, then relate it to evidence about migration between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

While English papers and term papers often have a thesis statement at the end of an introductory paragraph, for short essays and exams, start out with the thesis. This way you don't waste any valuable time or space warming up to the topic, but you get right to the point. The shorter the written work is supposed to be, the more quickly you should give the reader your thesis. For more about the fundamentals of writing essays see the [Guide to writing social science essays & exams](#).

Key terms in exam writing

Some terms that are frequently used in essay-type questions are listed below. Make sure that you are clear about the meaning of these.

Compare	Look for similarities and differences between
Contrast	Set in opposition in order to bring out differences
Criticize	Give your judgment about the merit of theories, or opinions, or about the truth of facts. You should back your judgment up by a discussion of specific evidence.
Define	Set down the precise meaning of a word or phrase.
Describe	Give a detailed or graphic account of.
Discuss	Investigate or examine by argument, sift and debate, giving reasons pro and con.
Evaluate	Make an appraisal of the worth of something from the perspective of its truth or utility; include to a lesser degree your personal opinion.
Explain	To make plain, to interpret, and to account for.

Illustrate	Use a figure or diagram to explain or clarify. <u>Or make clear by use of concrete, specific examples.</u>
Interpret	Expound the meaning of; make clear and explicit; usually also giving your own judgment.
Justify	Show adequate grounds for decisions or conclusions.
Outline	Give the main features or general principles of a subject
Relate	To show how things are connected to each other, and to what extent they are alike, or affect each other.
Review	To make a survey of, examining the subject critically.
State	Present in brief, clear form.
Summarize	Give a concise account of the chief points or substance of a matter, omitting details and examples.
Trace	Follow the development or history of a topic from some point of origin.

[this list adapted from Bird, C. and Bird, D. M., *Learning More Effective Study*, New York. Appleton-Century-Crofts 1945 pp 195-8]

MODIFIED FROM: Professor Kevin Hopkins, Widener-Harrisburg; for more detail, see:<http://academic.udayton.edu/legaled/barpass/Essay/Advice05.htm>

The overall purpose behind the essay examination is to: (1) test your knowledge and understanding of the case materials covered during the semester (i.e. can you identify from the exam fact pattern the relevant issues/areas of law to be discussed); and (2) test your ability to apply the ideas to new and/or factually similar situations.

To do this successfully, it is critical that you know the applicable idea. You must also, however, be able to convey this information as quickly as possible and in some type of structured written format. I offer the following approach to **reading the essay exam question** and organizing your thoughts. Remember: you should spend at least 1/4 to 1/3 of the allotted time for each question outlining and organizing your thoughts.

1. Browse through the **entire** exam packet first to assess the applicable time allotments for the questions, and to make sure your examination packet is complete (i.e. no missing pages, etc.).

2. For each specific fact pattern/exam question, I suggest that you go immediately to the end of the fact pattern and read the specific question to be addressed. This will usually be the last sentence of the fact pattern, or the last paragraph and may contain words such as "evaluate all possible ...," "name the steps," etc..

3. Once you have determined what the question is asking, quickly read the entire fact pattern first for a basic understanding of the facts, high-lighting and noting the obvious issues and facts that will be important in assessing the issues. You can do this by using hi-liters/colored pens, and making minor notations in the margins of the examination page.

4. Reread the question again, but this time, take it more slowly. During this review of the question, continue to look for and to note issues (i.e. causes of action or legal problems/situations covered during your review of the substantive law materials) but begin to really focus on those facts that will be critical for THE ANSWER.

5. You are ready to outline the ANSWER. You could begin by restating the question, then listing parts of the answer and illustrating with a diagram.

Ask yourself: Have you identified the issues involved in the problem? Have you alerted the reader "up front" to the issues to be decided? Have you properly "wrapped up" your argument for a specific issue before moving on to the next issue? Have you provided a conclusion for the reader? Have you answered the question posed? Is your answer responsive to the question? This is critical. Finally, does your answer reflect all of your knowledge of the cause of action, the applicable counter arguments and defenses?